

Thorns Through Time

The Appleby Archaeology Group gathered one night in December to hear a lecture by Dr. David Johnson about the history of an abandoned settlement near Ribblesdale named Thorns. This had been explored during a two year research project forming part of a four year conservation programme, variously funded and supported by the Ingleborough Dales Landscape Partnership, led by Yorkshire Dales Millenium Trust, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Yorkshire Dales Landscape Research Trust. The research project was led by Dr Johnson. Interestingly, part of his responsibilities consisted of introducing volunteers to new archaeological skills and techniques such as geophysical surveys and stabilizing partly standing buildings.

Thorns is a deserted upland farming settlement in a sheltered green hollow at some 290m elevation near Ribbleshead. It is surrounded by mature trees which provide shelter from the weather typical of those altitudes. The first record of the settlement was documented in Furness Abby archives dating to AD 1189-90. Soil samples suggest that even 800 years ago, the founders must have been aware of the advantage in establishing a new settlement on an area of well-

drained land overlying limestone. This is reflected by the soil of the in-by fields which is sweet and fertile, contrasting to that in the outlying fields immediately surrounding the settlement where it is poorly drained and acidic. The site includes the remains of a kiln for producing lime used to improve soil quality.

At the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (early sixteenth century) the settlement comprised six houses occupied by tenants. One of those examined as part of a study of vernacular architecture, may have survived from that time, judging by the thickness of the walls and evidence of cruck construction. Only one house was still occupied at the time of the 1881 census and ten years later the settlement appears to have been abandoned after 700 years of continuous occupation. Carefully selected areas around some of the buildings were targeted for limited excavation to assess covered mound-like features and gauge their purpose. All finds were recorded and logged.

As well as studying the buildings, Dr Johnson and his team of volunteers also recorded the archaeology of the surrounding area. A survey of farm buildings, dry stone walls and previously unrecorded boundary banks and ditches was included in this work. The age of individual dry stone walls was deduced from the shape and style of construction and location of both walls and ancient banks and ditches was recorded for posterity.

Although now deserted, it is clear Thorns was once a busy crossroad for travellers roaming across the fells with documentary evidence of ten routes converging on the isolated settlement. Thorns would have provided welcome shelter for people on foot and horseback in the days before metalled roads. Even today, the site has a wonderful atmosphere. This can be experienced by walking over the old packhorse bridge across Thorns Gill into the peaceful hollow with signs of 800 years habitation all about.

In closing, Dr Johnson hoped that those attending might be inspired to visit this remarkable place. There are three public rights of way converging on the settlement. These are all footpaths crossing private land and visitors are asked to respect the landowner's legal rights and not stray from them.

Copies of a spiral bound, 300 page, illustrated report of the Thorns Project can be purchased through the Yorkshire Dales Millenium Trust website at a cost of £13 including postage.